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INFO RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3627
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3763
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 2371
RHMMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003579

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: KN KS PGOV PREL PINR
SUBJECT: "ANYTHING BUT ROH" CARRIES THE DAY FOR
PRESIDENT-ELECT LEE MYUNG-BAK

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak won a landslide victory in the December 19 presidential election, winning 49 percent of the votes in a field of ten candidates and carrying all regions except Jeolla Provinces. Among pundits a strong consensus is emerging that Lee's was able to sweep to victory because of the following factors:

-- "Anything But Roh" mood among the voters, or the near-unanimous evaluation that Roh Moo-hyun had failed as president and the desire for a change.

-- A widespread acknowledgement, across the ideological spectrum, that a leader who could revive the economy was paramount.

-- GNP's ability to stay together, shown in its approval ratings, consistently 50 percent support through 2007, while the Uri Party and its successor UNDP barely managed to break double figure support. End Summary

Anything But Roh

¶2. (C) Because of overwhelming sentiment that Roh Moo-hyun had failed as a president, voters wanted something different and Lee Myung-bak is indeed, anything but Roh. While Lee and Roh both grew up poor and are both known for their penchant for misstatements, the comparison ends there. United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidate Chung Dong-young, Unification Minister under Roh, could not escape his association with Roh and failed to convince voters a Chung presidency would be much different from Roh's term. Leading political analyst Park Song-min told poloff December 18 that Lee would win, not just because of the economy, but because, "people wanted a change -- they are convinced the country needs something different than the last 10 years." A December 12 RealMeter poll showed 63 percent disapproved of Roh's overall performance, and only 24 percent approved of Roh.

¶3. (C) Lee, from the conservative GNP, secured the victory by touting a centrist platform and guaranteeing voters he would revive the economy. He stated he would institute more market-driven management practices to the government and even to foreign policy but most importantly he emphasized he would

be better than Roh Moo-hyun. Lee spent most of his career in construction, Roh defending civil rights leaders; Lee convinced voters that this difference in experience and management style would result in a different kind of government.

It's the Economy

¶4. (C) While the Korean economy grew at an almost five percent clip during the Roh presidency (2003-2008), most Koreans felt their economic situation was worse off now than it was when Roh took office. In a November 19 Kyunghyang Newspaper poll, 33.9 percent of respondents said they had become worse off during the Roh administration, 57 percent said there was no real change and only 8.5 percent felt they were better off. Even among respondents who voted for Roh in 2002, 25.3 percent felt they were worse off. Disappointment in the economy ruled and Lee Myung-bak effectively capitalized on this sentiment.

GNP: Staying Put

¶5. (C) Roh Moo-hyun was elected as the candidate for the Millennium Democratic Party; he then created the Uri Party ahead of the 2004 parliamentary elections and eventually the Uri Party dissolved in August 2007 after a year of political infighting. The UNDP was formed to create a new political union between NGOs, political leaders and "common" people. However, the widely held perception was the party was created simply because the Uri Party was unpopular and a Uri candidate would have no chance in the December election. UNDP lawmakers told poloff that the last-minute creation of the "new" party, while done with some good intentions, was

indeed a political ploy that failed to convince voters it was indeed something new.

¶6. (C) The GNP, meanwhile, instituted positive change after change without dissolving. For the first time, the GNP had an "open" primary where about 200,000 people, including some non-party members, were allowed to participate in selecting Lee as the party candidate. Substantive debates held during the July-August primary were much more policy-oriented than the three official debates held during the 23-day presidential campaign. Park Geun-hye, after losing narrowly to Lee Myung-bak, gracefully accepted her loss and supported Lee throughout the campaign. This is particularly significant since the last GNP also-ran, Rhee In-je, after losing to Lee Hoi-chang in 1997, formed his own party, split the conservative vote and this, in no small part, led to Kim Dae-jung's victory. In the past, the GNP has been plagued by corruption scandals. Park Geun-hye, as the Chairman of the GNP from 2004-2006 succeeded in reforming the party and cleaning up the GNP's image.

Non-Factors

¶7. (C) Almost as important as the factors that led to Lee's victory were the non-factors. Several factors that played a key role in 2002 did not influence the election this year. In 2002, foreign policy, regionalism and morality were important issues in a tight campaign. This year they did not play a significant role determining the outcome of the election.

¶8. (C) Lee's victory was due to his overwhelming support in the capital region, unlike past president-elects whose support emanated from a powerful regional base. During this election a "new regionalism" emerged and had an important effect on the election. Lee Myung-bak, as the popular former Mayor of Seoul, was the first conservative candidate to win in the traditionally left-leaning metropolitan region. Several political observers told poloff that instead of voters in the regions affecting their family in the capital, this time Seoul voters, who overwhelmingly support Lee,

influenced family in the rest of the country. After a series of elections that pitted the southwest vs. the southeast, Lee's dominance of the voter-rich metropolitan area (47 percent of the electorate) has created a new regional paradigm.

¶ 9. (C) In 2002 Roh Moo-hyun exploited the unfortunate accident by a U.S. military vehicle that killed two schoolgirls and said, "What if I am anti-American?" His attitude struck a chord and voters responded with mass demonstrations in support of Roh and condemning the U.S. This year, Chung Dong-young and Lee Myung-bak both pledged support for the KORUS FTA and that they would strengthen the U.S.-ROK relationship. Nothing about the relationship was even a topic for serious debate.

¶ 10. (C) Just as unanimously, candidates agreed that engagement with North Korea should continue. In the first campaign debate, the candidates explained nuanced differences in policy and approach toward North Korea, but none were significant. More importantly, voters did not attach much significance to the difference in policies toward the North, since most Koreans support engagement and assume it will continue.

¶ 11. (C) In a May 2002 Gallup poll, respondents indicated that morality was the most important criteria in selecting a president, leading over ability by a 36.5-33 margin. In November 2007, the same poll showed that ability was the most important, outstripping morality by a 63-25 margin.

¶ 12. (C) In 2002 as in past elections, young voters overwhelmingly supported the liberal candidate. In 2007, there was no strong division in support based on age or gender; Lee Myung-bak is the first president-elect to win all age categories. Professor Kang Won-taek told poloff that the lack of common grievances among any particular class, age or gender made it difficult for UNDP candidatge Chung to exploit the traditional liberal-conservative split that was so successful for Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

Comment

¶ 13. (C) All in all, Lee Myung-bak is a lucky man. Lee's campaign message emphasizing his personal experience and ability to revive the economy hit all the right notes with an electorate worried about its economic future. Many outside events also helped Lee maintain his lead from October 2006 until election day. Each time Lee appeared in danger that some of the many allegations aimed at him would cause him to lose his lead, something -- whether the Afghan hostage crisis or the Shin Jeong-a-Blue House scandal -- happened to distract the electorate, and more importantly, the press, from attacking Lee. A devout Christian, Lee has reasons to believe that someone above was looking out for him.

VERSHBOW